DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 347 CG 013 041

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TITLE Characterization of the Aged in Literature.
SPONS AGENCY Ohio State Commission on Aging, Columbus.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 23p.; For related documents see CG 013 036, CG 013 037, CG 013 038, CG 013 039, CG 013 040, CG 013 042, CG 013 043

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age; Bibliographies; Changing Attitudes; *Characterization; Gerontology; Instructional Materials; *Literature; *Older Adults; Physical Characteristics; Secondary Education; *Secondary School Students; *Senior Citizens; *Stereotypes; Teaching Guides

ABSTRACT

This educational program, designed for the secondary level, focuses on the characterization of the aged in literature. The overall purpose of the unit is to help destroy the popular mythology about aging. The average American has a highly distorted view of what it is to grow old and the characteristics of that process. This program has the specific objectives of promoting a more realistic view of aging and its effects upon the individuals, and helping students realize that authors often reflect in their works both personal and societal attitudes of the period in which they write. Content and/or procedures, instructional materials, and a selected list of novels, short stories, and dramas depicting life in the latter years are included. It is hoped that this educational program will provide the essential first step toward changing attitudes as a nation and solving the aging problem. (Author/KA)

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CHARACTERIZATION OF THE AGED IN LITERATURE

by John Myers

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UNIT TOPIC: CHARACTERIZATION OF THE AGED IN LITERATURE

GRADE LEVEL: This unit is designed for use at the high school level, but may also be applicable at the junior high level for ninth grade use. The unit is designed to be flexible in both application and timing. That is, by deletion or inclusion of certain things, the degree of difficulty and depth of the unit can be adjusted by the teacher to meet the specific needs of his or her students. Also, selection of the genre and specific works for study will greatly affect timing of the unit. It takes longer to treat a novel than a short story, and teachers wishing to examine multiple works of more than a single author may wish to extend the unit even further. Generally speaking, in the case of the short story, the unit is designed to run from four to six weeks, at the discretion of the teacher.

I. INTRODUCTION

The overall purpose of this unit is to help to destroy the popular mythology about aging. In our youth-oriented society, the process of aging and its effects on the elderly have generally been ignored, and we have been quick to accept the stereotype

of the aged person without question. As a result, the average American has a highly distorted view of what it is to grow old and the characteristics of that process. Since aging is a process that affects us all, and since the "problem" of aging is a prominent topic today in society, it behooves us all to have a factual understanding of the process and its effects upon the individual in American society. The teacher of English can help to destroy the aging mythology and replace it with a basis of fact by utilizing the approach to literature upon which this unit is based. The approach is equally valid for teaching the short story, the novel, the drama, poetry, or any other literary genre. In this particular unit, for purposes of illustration, we will confine ourselves to the use of the approach in dealing with the short story. Based upon the proposition that stereotypes held by individual authors are likely to be reflected in their work, this approach calls for an examination of the aged as they appear in literature and a comparison of that characterization with the facts of aging. Thus, a teacher might examine the way a particular period may have seen the aged in general. By comparing these literary characterizations of the elderly with factual material on the process, it is hoped that students would better understand the aging process in themselves and the older members of their family and community. Focusing on this particular facet of an author's work might also contribute to a fuller understanding of the literary techniques of the particular author, and the attitudes of the time in which he wrote. In any case, students will find themselves examining their own views about aging, and will be forced to personally clarify those views based, not on mythology, but on a factual body of knowledge.

II. UNIT OBJECTIVES

By the time students complete this unit, they should:

A. Hold a more realistic view of the process of aging and its effects upon the individuals.

B. Realize that authors often reflect in their works both personal and societal attitudes of the period in which they write.

III. CONTENT AND/OR PROCEDURES

It is recommended that the teacher begin with the discussion of stereotypes of the aged and their validity. It is then an easy matter to direct students to the portions of the Smith text dealing with the actual characteristics of aging and the aged. Students should prove enthusiastic about trying to derive a factual picture of the aged for comparison with the mythological stereotype, as they will be quite surprised at the facts they learn. There is such a discrepancy between the stereotype and the real, and the subject is of such relevancy to their own family and community relationships that interest in this approach should run high. The teacher, at this stage, may wish to deal only with a basic stereotype-versus-reality problem from the text, but, should student interest in learning more about aging be high, the text will permit a thorough study of the area, either prior to dealing with the literary work to be studied or following its consideration.

Once the student has an understanding of the present-day stereotype of the aged as well as knowledge of the realities, he is ready to address the work under study. The teacher may have earlier taught the particular work from another viewpoint, returning to it now to concentrate specifically on the characterization, or may be presenting it for the first time to the class. The unit is sufficiently flexible that it can be ordered several ways to meet the needs of teacher and students. Armed, then, with a basis for comparison, the student can approach the literary work with the purpose of deriving from it the author's view of the aged. This viewpoint can then be examined as reflective of the literary period and the society in which the artist wrote. This stereotype may be considered in comparison to the present-day stereotype, that of another author, or to the realities of aging.

As an example, let us turn to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," a tale in which four aged people attempt to recapture their youth by drinking a fabulous elixir from the famous "fountain of youth." To the student, armed with a factual basis of knowledge, moving through the story, he will easily be able to pick out Hawthorne's image of the aged person. He will also note the many discrepancies between Hawthorne's characters and reality. Hawthorne shows the reader "withered" and "melancholy" persons, plagued with gout and diseases that accompany old age. He tells us that their early years were their best ones and that they lack all "vigor." He, by implication, tells us that they no longer have sense of sexuality. He tells us that they are often "beside themselves," worried by "troubles" and "recollections," "as is not unfrequently the case with old people." Consider that all this information he gives us in only the first paragraph of the story, and that it is only about fifty percent accurate, so far as actual characteristics attributable to aging are concerned. Dr. Heidegger himself is pictured as "eccentric" and harmless, wrapped up in his memories of the past. All of them, of course, yearn for the days of their youth. They are generally "gray, decrepit, sapless, miserable creatures." And so it goes throughout the story, as Hawthorne paints an unrealistic picture of the aged, but not one that is so different from our present-day stereotype.

The student can go through the story, if desired, with a fine tooth comb, putting together a detailed picture of Hawthorne's elders. Class discussion of this stereotype and the realities of the aging process may prompt the student to seek to examine other works in the same manner, contrasting and comparing. It is up to the teacher at this point to determine where he or she seeks to go from here. After consideration of a literary work in the manner described above, the teacher may desire to further pursue aging as a topic for study, or may seek to extend the approach to other works of literature. Such choices must be made on the basis of

class interest and course requirements.

Should the teacher desire to pursue this approach further with other types of literature or with other authors, activities such as follow might be considered:

1. Individually, students might examine multiple works of the same author to see whether or not his aged stereotypes are consistent, or they might examine representative writers of different eras to see how, if at all, the aged stereotype changes over the years.
2. Students might delve into the history of a particular period to determine why an author holds a particular stereotype. The student might look at how a given period treated its elders, its attitudes toward them and aging in general.
3. Students might choose to examine the treatment of the elderly and attitudes toward aging in our own society or in other societies. There is a world of difference between the treatment of the aged in tribal societies and in our own, for example.
4. Students might pursue study into other areas of aging, or into the popular areas of death and dying.
5. Guest speakers from the community, who are themselves aged, might be invited to speak on what it means to be old in your community. They might also talk on retirement or related subjects.
6. Students might go into the community to try to determine attitudes toward the aged in the particular area. They might look at various programs for the elderly, or even define, and take action to try to fill, some need of the aged members of the community which is not currently met.
7. The teacher might examine other units in this series on aging to determine their possible application to meeting the needs of his or her students.

IV. INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Aging in America by Bert Kruger Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) has been selected as the supporting text for this unit. The text is humanistic in its approach to aging and is highly readable for teachers and students alike. It provides a clear, up-to-date coverage of the whole area of aging, including suggestions for solving the "problems" of aging in our society. If it is not desired to issue the text to students, the teacher will find therein enough resources to serve as a basis for his or her presentation of the factual bases of aging to the student. Should this text be unavailable, any good library will have materials that may be easily adapted to use. In addition, the teacher may draw material from the short history of aging included with this unit. The Smith text, though, is available through local booksellers in paperback for less than five dollars.

V. CONCLUSION

This unit has been designed to be flexible for the teacher, and easily adaptable to time requirements and student interests. It is hoped that the teacher will not take it "as is," but will tailor its contents and approach to the specific needs of students. Suggested activities and procedures are only suggestions, and should serve to provide a guide to the teacher in preparing his or her own unit. Its purpose is to allow the English teacher a different approach to content, which in addition meets a major need of the student. Inclusion of this approach to the English curriculum will help the student to clarify his own conception of what it is to grow old, thus helping him in his relationships with parents and grandparents, and finally in the acceptance that the process will ultimately affect him also. An understanding of the process of aging in society is the essential first step toward changing our attitudes as a nation and solving the aging "problem." That is the purpose of this unit.

THE ELDERLY

A Selected List of Novels Portraying Life in the Latter Years

* Available in Paperback
\+ Available in Talking Books
ℓ Available in Large Print

Achebe, Chinua. Arrow of God. 1967.

An aged African chief-priest chooses to resist the instrusion of European religion into the domain of his god. Although physically infirm, he battles on spiritual grounds, pitting the god of his people against the god of the whites. The resulting struggle drives him to madness, and symbolizes the destruction of the traditional W. African spirit worship by the African followers of Christ. (*)

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. 1959.

A respected African elder chooses to resist the intrusion of European ways that are causing the traditional bonds of his society to fall apart. Receiving no support from either his age-mates or his descendants, he is driven into suicide. (*)

Aksakev, S.T. The Family Chronicle. 1961

A good picture of a patriarchal grandfather on the Russian frontier at the end of the 18th century. (*)

Amis, Kingsley. Girl 20. 1971.

A 54-year-old violinist-conductor resists aging by taking a 17-year-old mistress in this biting satire. (*)

Bagnold, Enid. The Loved and the Envied. 1951.

The life, loves, and difficulty with her daughter are related in this portrait of fifty-three-year-old lady MacLean and how she confronts aging.

Baird, Thomas. People Who Pull You Down. 1970.

Lydia Cowdory, 75, suddenly runs away from home and leaves no clues for the two brothers she has cared for since her husband's death. The book says much about loneliness and alienation in America today.

Balzac, Honore de. Pere Goriot. 1950.

This 19th century classic relates how Goriot rose from a country provincial to a Parisian aristocrat and his fall and sacrifices because of the love for two ungrateful daughters. (*)

Beckett, Samuel. Malone Dies. 1956.

All we know in the novel is that old Malone is dying. He tells stories to himself, the events become violent, crowded and hallucinatory. At the end Malone is dead, having wondered what the true meaning of life is and concluding that it is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (*)

Bellow, Saul. Mr. Sammler's Planet. 1970.

An aged Polish-Jew, a scholar and philosopher who survived the Nazi camps moves to New York and speculates on the present and on the future of life. (* +)

Bennett, Jack. The Hawk Alone. 1965.

A seventy-year-old white man from South Africa discovers that his skill, standards, and moral code toward hunting are not appreciated in a new age not sharing his values. He commits suicide when acting as a safari guide to a group of young people.

Bru, H. The Old Man and His Sons. 1970.

Ketil and his wife are in their seventies. They have reared eleven children, all but one of whom have their own households. The novel shows the conflict of the old who want no luxury but only a roof over their heads and food enough to eat and the material pleasures sought by their children. The setting is the Faroe Islands of the North Atlantic.

Buck, Pearl. The Good Earth. 1931.

Traces of life of Wan Lung, a Chinese peasant with a love of the sea, through his marriage, birth of sons, famine, rebuilding of his fortune, and at his death, hearing his sons talk of selling the land he loved so much so they can move to the city. (* + #)

Burgess. William V. Second-Hand Persons. 1969.

Reveals the personalities of several characters in a home for old men somewhere near London.

Cary. Joyce. The Horse's Mouth. 1950.

Gulley Jimson, sixty-seven year-old English artist, reveals his reflections, his ideas for pictures, his efforts to cadge a dinner or a piece of canvas, his interlude in jail for smashing windows, and his reunion with his old love: an engaging, if unprincipaled Bohemian. (+ *)

Chase, Mary Ellen. The Plum Tree. 1949

The plum tree stood on the lawn of the Home for Aged Women. It was in full bloom on the day when three of the old ladies, all over 80, were to be transferred to an insane asylum. It tells the story of the loving and understanding matron and nurse who had presided over the home for 30 years. What might have been a nightmare turned into a gala party.

Christie, Agatha. At Bertram's Hotel. 1965.

Miss Jane Marple. lady detective of sorts, revisits a quiet London hotel which she remembered fondly from her youth. The book not only involves a mystery with little violence, but a good contrast between this era and that of Miss Marple's youth. (* ∅)

Clavel, Bernard. The Fruits of Winter. 1969.

Explores the psychology of old age and the effect of war on people. Set in provincial France during the last year of WWII, the novel deals with an aging couple and the trouble in their family. (+)

Corbett, Elizabeth. The Young Mrs. Meigs. 1931.

Mrs. Meigs at eighty, doesn't care if she is half dead so long as one leg is under a bridge table. She is cheerfully independent and that, plus common sense, help her and her family avoid many stormy scenes. (*)

Cowley, Joy. Nest in a Falling Tree. 1967.

Set in New Zealand, the story tells of Maura Prince, who has nursed her blind, cardiac-troubled mother for the last twenty years. Maura has an affair with Red, an 18-year-old gardener, but this causes a crisis when her mother returns home from the hospital.

Detre, Jean. A Happy Ending. 1967.

70-year-old Mr. Rose, rich, retired businessman, spends winters in Florida and the rest of the year with his sister-in-law in New York. Visits to his doctor and an interfering family make up his life until he meets Mrs. Sweet who becomes his companion even to Europe and Africa. (+)

Ekwensi, Cyprian. Burning Grass. 1966.

An elderly and respected man is afflicted by "the wandering sickness." He leaves his homestead to seek out his grown sons, and in the process learns something of the reasons for his life. Reflects a W. African view of death and the afterlife. (*)

France, Anatole. The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard. 1921.

Sylvestre is a kind-hearted, absent-minded old archeologist. He kidnaps the orphaned daughter of his former love but when her guardian is found to be an embezzler, she is made the legal ward of Bonnard. The author is a Nobel Prize winner.

Gibson, William. A Mass for the Dead. 1968.

A successful writer re-creates his life with his parents to atone for failing to express his love when they were alive, to prepare for his own old age as a father, and to pass to his children what he has learned. (+)

Gilman, Dorothy. The Amazing Mrs. Pollifax. 1970.

When the CIA needs someone to fly to Istanbul and contact a defecting Russian agent, they turn to Mrs. Emily Pollifax, a nice little old lady in a flowered hat. The trouble is that she soon finds herself not only embroiled with a gang of ruthless enemy agents, but on the wrong side of the Turkish police as well. But with a lot of gentle persuasion and a karate chop or two she again accomplishes her mission. (+ *)

Greene, Graham. Travels with My Aunt. 1970.

A 75-year-old aunt jaunts around the world kicking up her heels. (*)

Hemingway, Ernest. The Old Man and the Sea.

An old fisherman overtaken by bad luck proves his tenacity and courage when he hooks a monster marlin. He kills the catch but is hauled out to sea and they bring back what the sharks haven't touched.

Hilton, James. Good-Bye Mr. Chips. 1934.

Mr. Chipping, known to three generations of schoolboys at Brookfield as Mr. Chips, recalls his life there, the jokes he had made, which became classics, the thousands he had known and regarded as his boys. Just as gently as he lived he fades smilingly out of life. (+ * #)

Kawabata, Yasunari. The Sound of the Mountain. 1970.

A Nobel Prize winner's story of an old Japanese man who, while worrying over family pride, becomes aware of the aging of his mind and body. (*)

Lawrence, Josephine. The Web of Time. 1953.

Story of Munsey Willis, who has spent the last of his money on his daughter's wedding and is compelled to retire because of his age. The plot concerns his search for a job and self-respect.

Mann, Thomas. Buddenbrooks. 1924.

A Nobel Prize winner's chronicle of four generations of the Buddenbrook family, from prosperity to extinction through over-refinement. (*)

Paton, Alan. Cry the Beloved Country. 1948.

Aged Zulu priest is forced from the security of his rural parish to attempt the rescue of his children from the pressures of modern urban life. The gap between the two generations is too great, and he is forced to watch them perish. (+ # *)

Saltykov-Shehedrin, M. The Golovlovs. 1961.

A realistic and humorous 19th century Russian satire on a wretched family, including a cantankerous but unfortunate mother. (*)

Sherman, D.R. Old Mali and the Boy. 1964.

A boy in India learns some lessons from an old man while on a hunting trip.

Spark, Muriel. Momento Mori. 1959.

The reactions of a group of elderly people when they receive a message "Remember you must die." (* *)

Tanizaki, Junichiro. Diary of a Mad Old Man. 1965.

A seventy-year-old Japanese man writes in detail of his failing health, what the doctors are doing about it, his family, and especially his daughter-in-law, who plays upon him to win special favors. (*)

Trollope, Anthony. The Warden. 1929.

Tells of an old Englishman during the 19th century who runs a home for old men and of his attempt to retain his integrity in trying circumstances. (*)

Updike, John. The Poorhouse Fair. 1959.

Concerns the lives of a handful of marvelously eccentric and understanding people in a poorhouse for the old on the plains of central New Jersey. (*)

Zola, Emile. Earth. 1955.

Presents French peasant life and the greed for land, which causes hatred between sisters, neglect of parents, and ends in the murder of a woman by her sister. There is much vulgarity in the story, making the characters seem lower than the animals around them.

August 1974

This bibliography is one in a series prepared by a Southeastern Michigan Consortium on Gerontology and the Humanities (a cooperative effort of Eastern Michigan University and Charles Stewart Mott, Jackson, Monroe County, and Washtenaw Community Colleges.) For more information contact Dr. Walter G. Moss, History and Philosophy Department, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197 (313-487-0054).

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

THE LATTER YEARS

A Selected List of Short Stories about the Elderly

* Available in Paperback
\+ Available in Talking Books
\= Available in Cassette Books

Aldrich, Bess Streeter. "Bid the Tapers Twinkle," "The Mountains Look On Marathon," in The Man Who Caught the Weather and Other Stories. 1936.

In the first story an old woman faces the possibility of celebrating her first Christmas without her family, and in the second an old judge is torn between "roughing" it and being pampered by his son and daughter-in-law.

Auchincloss, Louis. "Suttee," "The Cathedral Builder," "The Double Gap," "The Waiver," in Second Chance: Tales of Two Generations. 1970

Each of these stories deals with a well-to-do elderly person and his or her relations with other people of various ages. (*)

Auchincloss, Louis. "Sabina and the Herd," "The Landmarker," "The Senior Partner's Ghost," in Tales of Manhattan. 1967

The tales deal with a 70-year-old mother and her herd of daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren; with a 70-year-old man who becomes bored with his previous mode of existence; and with an old lawyer's integrity. (*)

Babel, Isaac. "Sunset," in You Must Know Everything. 1969

Depicts conflict between father and sons in the Jewish quarter of Odessa in early 20th century Russia. (*)

Babel, Isaac. "The End of the Almshouse," In Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories. 1963.

Deals with the fate of the old in a home for the aged in early Soviet Russia. (*)

Bates, H.E. "The Major of Hussars," "Time," "Where the Cloud Breaks," in The Best of H.E. Bates. 1963

The first story deals with a major whose efforts to resist aging bring him trouble in the form of a young wife. The second deals with three old men, the oldest of whom is the most active. The final story is a charming and somewhat tragic one in which a lonely old man and old woman almost overcome their loneliness through love.

Beckett, Samuel. "The End," in Stories and Texts for Nothing. 1967

The story, like so many of Beckett's works, touches on negative aspects of old age, in this case poverty, homelessness, and social isolation. (*)

Bellow, Saul. "Leaving the Yellow House," in Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories. 1968.

A woman in her seventies living alone in the desert attempts to cope with loneliness and medical and financial problems. (* +)

Bontemps, Arna. "A Summer Tragedy," in Black Voices. 1968.

A husband and wife who have share-cropped some land for almost fifty years attempt to move away to new land and tragedy results. (* +)

Buck, Pearl. "The Old Demon," in This Is My Best, Whit Burnett, (ed.). 1942

An old woman manifests a type of courage that is related at least partially to her age when her Chinese village is invaded by the Japanese.

Buck, Pearl. "The Old Mother," in Hearts Come Home. 1962

An old Chinese mother is criticized by her son and daughter-in-law, with whom she lives, for her old-fashioned ways. (*)

Bunin, Ivan. "The Gentleman from San Francisco," in The Gentleman from San Francisco. 1923

A man waits until his late fifties to begin to live, but finds he does not really know how to do so. (*)

Canfield, Dorothy. "Old Man Warner," "Sex Education," "The Heyday of the Blood," in Harvest of Stories, 1957.

The first and last stories are affectionate and sympathetic portraits of independent old men. The second reflects the wisdom that can come with age. (+)

Cather, Willa. "Neighbor Rosicky," in Obscure Destinies. 1930

A Kind and wise old Nebraska farmer is portrayed within a family context.

Cather, Willa. "The Old Beauty," in The Old Beauty and Others. 1948.

A long, bittersweet and nostalgic tale of the effect of time on a once beautiful and charming woman.

Chekhov, Anton. "A Dull Story: From the Notebook of an Old Man," in Ward Six and Other Stories. 1965

An old professor facing death reviews his life and finds it meaningless. (*)

Chekhov, Anton. "The Peasants," in Great Stories by Chekhov. 1959

An excellent depiction of the life of a three-generational Russian peasant family at the end of the 19th century. (* + Available in Talking Books under the title Peasants, and Other Stories).

Ferber, Edna. "Old Lady Mandle," "Old Man Minick," "The Gay Old Dog," "The Sudden Sixties," in One Basket. 1947.

Four excellent stories in which elderly people, all without a living husband or wife, attempt to relate in a successful way to their children or other kin. (* All available in One Basket. Vol. I. Manor Books, 1973)

Goodman, Paul. "A Cross-Country Runner at Sixty-Five," In Adam and His Works. 1968.

What makes a man continue to run at 65? (*)

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," "Old Esther Dudley," "The Village Uncle," in Twice-Told Tales. 1911

Stories of a fountain of youth experiment, an old British loyalist who clings to her ways, and an old storyteller. (*)

Lessing, Doris. "Flight," in The Short Story: An Inductive Approach, Gerald Levin, (ed.). 1967

An aged keeper of pigeons reluctantly resigns himself to the inevitable marriage of his last young granddaughter. (*)

London, Jack. "The Law of Life," in The Best Short Stories of Jack London, 1953.

An aged Eskimo on the trail embraces valiantly his inevitable place in the cycle of nature. (*)

Mansfield, Katherine. "Miss Brill," in The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield. 1954

The loneliness of a sensitive, little old lady is unexpectedly intensified in the midst of one of her few supremely happy moments. (* available in her paperback collection, Stories)

Marshall, Paule. "Barbados," "Brazil," "British Guiana," "Brooklyn," in Soul Clap Hands and Sing. 1961

Each of these stories by this daughter of Barbadian parents deals with an elderly man who is confronted by a crisis or a change in his pattern of life.

Maupassant, Guy de. "A Family," "A Humble Drama," "An Old Man," "Growing Old," "Julie Romain," "Old Amable," "Old Milon," "The Love of Long Ago," "The Mask," "The Old Man," in The Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant. 1955

Excellent depictions of aging and the aged by the 19th century French master of the short story.

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Judgment Day," in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor. 1971

The first, third, and fourth stories here are concerned in part with an elderly person's relationship to a grown son or daughter. The final story is also an excellent depiction of the difficulty an old man has in adjusting to a new environment. The second story concerns a centenarian. (*)

O'Hara, John. "The Friends of Miss Julia," "The Manager," "The Man on the Tractor," in The Hat on the Bed. 1963

Just a few of the many short stories O'Hara wrote about elderly people in the last decade of his life. "The Manager" is an especially good reflection of some common social attitudes toward the elderly. (*)

Paton, Alan. "A Life for a Life," in Tales From A Troubled Land. 1961

An aged Hottentot is serving as chief shepherd to a European. When the latter is found murdered, police force the old shepherd to search for the murderer, despite the fact that the latter is his own son. Illustrative of the helplessness of the black aged in South Africa. (*)

Price, Reynolds. "Uncle Grant," in Modern Short Stories: The Uses of Imagination, Arthur Mizener, (ed.) 1967.

A young man tells a wonderfully absorbing account of an old man who was part of his family setting for many years.

Singer, Isaac Bashevis. "The Old Man," "The Spinoza of Market Street," in Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer. 1966

Each tells the story of an amazing old man in Warsaw.

Steinbeck, John. "The Great Mountain," "The Leader of the People," in The Long Valley. 1938

The first story is of an old man looking for a place to die and the second of an old man who talks too much of the past to suit his son-in-law. (* +)

Stuart, Jesse. "Another April," in This Is My Best, Whit Burnett, (ed.). 1942

A 91-year-old man remains alive to the wonders of nature, as his daughter and grandson fondly observe.

Svevo, Italo. "Death," "The Story of the Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl," in Short Sentimental Journey and Other Stories. 1967

As so often in Svevo's fiction, the central character of both stories is an old man who reflects on aging.

Taylor, Peter. "What You Hear From 'Em?" in Modern Short Stories: The Uses of Imagination. Arthur Mizener, (ed.). 1967.

A proud old Negro woman tries courageously to face inevitable changing social conditions which will render her place in society obsolete. (+ available in Talking Books in The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor)

Walker, Alice. "To Hell With Dying," in The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers, Langston Hughes, (ed.). 1967.

A wonderfully detailed account is given of an aged Negro man who, it seems, will never die, but he finally does. (*+)

Welty, Eudora. "A Visit of Charity," in Selected Stories. 1954.

Depicts the visit of a Campfire Girl to an Old Ladies' Home and the discomfort she feels when visiting two old ladies. Good brief picture of some of the indignities suffered by the aged in some institutions.

August 1974

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Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities

GROWING OLD

A Selected List of Dramas Depicting Life in the Latter Years

* Available in Paperback
\+ Available in Talking Books
x Available in Record

Aiken, George. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in Best Plays of the Early American Theater. John Gassner, (ed.). 1967.

The story of slavery and freedom, South and North, as seen through the poignant experiences of an old, religious slave, Uncle Tom, and his associates, black and white.

Albee, Edward. The American Dream. 1961.

A critical look at Mommy's and Daddy's attitude toward Grandma. (*)

Albee, Edward. The Sandbox. 1960.

A shorter and earlier variation of The American Dream. (*)

Alvarez Quintero, Serafim and Joaquin. "A Sunny Morning" in Thirty Famous One-Act Plays, Bennet Cerf and Van Cartmell, (eds.). 1943.

A charming piece set in Madrid where an old man and woman who were once lovers meet after years of separation.

Anderson, Robert. I Never Sang for My Father. 1968.

A remorseful, intellectual son has nagging memories of missed chances to repair the alienation from his clever, cantankerous old father. Also deals with the theme of "what is to become of dad now that mom is dead and he is alone?" (*)

Anouilh, Jean. The Waltz of the Toreodors. 1957.

A retired French general reminisces about missed opportunities and keeps his eye out for new ones, while his wife looks on in dismay. Humorous.

Arden, John. "The Happy Haven" in Three Plays. 1966.

Life in a hospital for the old. (*)

Bagnold, Enid. "The Chinese Prime Minister" in Four Plays. 1971.

Deals with the problems of a 70-year-old actress who decides to go off and marry a Chinese Prime Minister.

Beckett, Samuel. Endgame. 1958.

A one-act play that furnishes food for thought about old age, helplessness, and dying. (*)

Beckett, Samuel. Krapp's Last Tape. 1960.

A one-act play in which 69-year-old Krapp listens to his former self on tape and reflects upon time and life. Pessimistic as is most of Beckett's work. (* x)

Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot. 1954.

Two old tramps wait for Godot and the author through them comments on change and time. (* x)

Chekhov, Anton. "Uncle Vanya" in Four Great Plays. 1958.

Uncle Vanya feels that he is aging quickly in the Russian countryside while real life is passing him by. The marriage of a retired professor to a much younger wife also leads us to reflect on the role of age. (* x)

Congreve, William. The Way of the World. Available in various collections.

A comedy in which a lovesick old woman is made to look like a fool. Typical of late 18th century English dramatists view of the old.

Coward, Noel. Waiting in the Wings. 1960.

Retired actresses in an old age home.

Elder III, Lonne. Ceremonies in Dark Old Men. 1965.

A widower in Harlem attempts to cope with aging and his adult children, one of whom tires of supporting him. (*)

Goldman, James. The Lion in Winter. 1966.

An aging but energetic king and queen struggle zestfully with each other and their grown children, one of whom is Richard the Lionheart. (*)

Hansberry, Lorraine. A Raisin in the Sun. 1961.

Trials of Lena Younger (Mama), a struggling black woman in her early sixties, in reconciling her deep-seated dreams of spiritual emancipation with the more sophisticated dreams of the other members of the family on the occasion of her receipt of a legacy. (* x)

Ibsen, Henrik. John Gabriel Borkman. Available in various collections.

Borkman, distinguished, aging, has been rejected by his son and society, but hopes for new recognition. The rejection of his talents "killed" him long before his physical death. (*)

Ibsen, Henrik. The Master Builder. Available in various collections.

An aging architect fears youthful competition, but allies with a young woman in a desperate effort to prove he is still vigorous. (* x)

Ionesco, Eugene. "The Chairs" in Four Plays. 1958.

A bored, almost senile old man wants to give the world an important message. He and his wife set up chairs which are filled with invisible people. A deaf-mute tries to delvier the message but fails. (* x)

Kaufman, George and Hart, Moss. You Can't Take It With You. 1937.

The joyful, though often overwhelming, adventures of Martin Vanderhof, known as Grandpa, a wiry little man of 75, who leads his family through the complexities of American business civilization, carrying the banner of doing-what-one-likes rather than what-one-must.

Lee, Wayne. "Deadwood" in The Golden Book of Church Plays, Lawrence Brings, (ed.). 1955.

Two women consider an old grandmother "deadwood," but the reader knows better.

McEnroe, Robert. "The Silver Whistle" in The Burns Mantle Best Plays of 1948-49. John Chapman, (ed.). 1949.

The tale of a modern Cyrano in an old people's home, to which his lies and fantasies bring new life.

Miller, Arthur. Death of a Salesman. 1949.

The pathetic story of Willy Loman, 63, who, after 35 years in the business of selling, is forced to confront his failure as a salesman and human being and all the terrible implications of failure. (* x +)

Miller, Arthur. The Price. 1968.

A policeman and his wife ponder the question of his retirement, and he and his brother dispute who was right and who was wrong in sacrificing to support their father almost thirty years before. An energetic 89-year-old man is another major and fascinating character. (* +)

Moliere, Jean. The Miser. Available in various collections.

Harpagon, a rich and suspicious old man, scolds his children for being spendthrifts, but decides to marry a poor young wife. He never learns that human love is worth more than money. Comic but unflattering picture of old age. (* x)

Mowatt, Anna Cora. "Fashion" in Best Plays of the Early American Theatre, John Gassner, (ed.). 1967.

Conflict between two dynamic Americans--Adam Trueman, 72, robust, rich farmer of Catteraugus county, proud to be a plain man, and Mrs. Elizabeth Tiffany, a lady of New York City, who imagines herself fashionable.

O'Neill, Eugene. Long Day's Journey into Night. 1956.

Although Mary Tyrone, 54, married for 35 years to James Tyrone, 65, is the pivotal character, the play is a family drama, revolving around husband and wife and their two sons. (* x)

Osborne, Paul. On Borrowed Time. 1937.

A tender dramatization of the love of a grandfather and his grandson, Pud, with death standing in the wings.

Plautus. "The Comedy of Asses" in The Complete Roman Drama. Vol. I. George E. Duckworth, (ed.). 1942.

An old father competes with his son for a woman's favor and ends up being humiliated by his wife and others. Comedy.

Shakespeare, William, King Lear. Many available editions.

King Lear, in his old age gives his money and power to two unworthy daughters; family chaos leads to national chaos, with degradation of the characters who uphold love and loyalty. (* x)

Shaw, George Bernard. Back to Methuselah. 1921.

A long play in which civilization is improved by significantly prolonging man's life span. (*)

Sophocles. Oedipus at Colonus. Available in various collections.

Cursed by fate, estranged from his sons, guided by his daughter Antigone, aging, blind, lonely Oedipus wanders to Colonus seeking refuge. Death will be an impartial friend who will release Oedipus from his unhappy life. (*)

Sterling, Nora. "The Room Upstairs" in Family Life Plays. 1961

This play shows the problems which arise when old and young people in a family live together in the same house. But here they are sucessfully resolved.

Strindberg, J. August. "Storm" in Plays of Strindberg. Vol. I., 1964.

The peace of an old man is disrupted and painful memories are stirred when his former wife returns unexpectedly.

Terence. The Self-Tormentor. Several editions available.

An elderly and essentially loving father tries to trick his son into following a life-style of which the father can approve. He then tortures himslef with remorse. Comedy. (*)

Terry, Megan. "The Gloaming, Oh My Darling" in Viet Rock and Other Plays. 1967

Two old women and an old man in a nursing home who reflect the author's philosophy of embracing life regardless of how little of it is left to us. (*)

Williams, Tennessee. "The Last of My Solid Gold Watches" in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays. 1953.

An old salesman talks of his friends who are dying and laments the fact that people and life no longer have the quality they did in the old days.

Williams, Tennessee. "Sweet Bird of Youth" in Three Plays. 1964.

A sensational accumulation of degeneracy and decay is depicted by an over-sexed actress, who resists aging, a bigoted father, a diseased girl and a gigolo seducer. (*)

Zindel, Paul. The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds. 1971

Although this play is primarily concerned with a woman and her two teen-age daughters, it also deals in a minor but powerful way with attitudes towards a very old woman. (*)

August 1974

This bibliography is one in a series prepared by a Southeastern Michigan Consortium on Gerontology and the Humanities (a cooperative effort of Eastern Michigan University and Charles Stewart Mott, Jackson, Monroe County, and Washtenaw Community Colleges). For more information contact Dr. Walter G. Moss, History and Philosophy Department, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197 (313-487-0054).

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities